

## LONGFELLOW'S POEMS.\*

No poet has yet appeared in America whose success, when we consider the time that has elapsed since his advent, will at all compare with that of Longfellow. He made his *débüt*, some two years since, in a volume of poems which was quaintly called "The Voices of the Night," and he has since followed this up with a collection of other ballads, poems, and translations. The former volume has already passed through five editions. The latter, if we may argue from its excellence, will rival its predecessor in popularity. To Mr. Longfellow, indeed, must be awarded the merit of having been the first American poet whose works were patronised in a manner commensurate with their worth. He is nearly the only one of the "*irritabile genus*" who has paid, from the sale of his books, the cost of their binding. He alone has filled his pocket with the proceeds of his pen. He is either a very lucky or a very meritorious man.

Mr. Longfellow is unquestionably possessed of genius. His imagination is of the highest order, he has a singular command of language, and his soul is as alive to feeling as is the sensitive, tremulous aspen. Then his taste is refined and his acquirements solid. No one can read his "Hyperion" without feeling that the writer was born a poet. The imagination scattered throughout this fantastic prose work is sufficient to fit out a dozen poems of the order of the Giaour, and fairly puts to shame the elaborate piece of arabesque which Moore has facetiously called "Lalla Rookh, a poem." Yet "Hyperion" is full of faults. It is neither a tale, a rhapsody, a poem, nor even a readable book. We never saw the man who perused its pages *seriatim*, and we are sure, if such a man exists, he must be crazed. And yet "Hyperion" glimmers with genius as a lake at midnight glimmers with the stars of heaven. It has not the melody of numbers, and yet it is full of music. You cannot rustle a leaf without waking a most delicious harmony. It is a magnificent prose poem, if such a thing as a *prose-poem* can be.

Possessing an imagination of so high an order, it is no wonder that Longfellow became instantly popular when he clothed his thoughts in numbers. His "Voices of the Night" found an echo in every heart. Their grandeur, their simplicity, the nerve of the language, as well as the imagination which shone over all, recommended them to both the popular and critical ear. The author was just sufficiently known to give his productions the *prestige* of excellence. The bank had the reputation of being good, and whatever notes it issued

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\* Voices of the Night. By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. John Owen, Cambridge, 1839.

Ballads and other poems. By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. John Owen, Cambridge, 1842.

passed freely in the market. Mr. Longfellow's poems were read with interest, if not with avidity. Their high merit secured them an instant reputation. Their success was unexampled. Men, who had seen other excellent poets left in obscurity, wondered at this, and cried out that the days of the miracles had returned. But they did not comprehend the causes which led to this sudden popularity. The merit of these poems will not alone explain their success. They had several qualities—apart from their poetic worth—which recommended them to the public taste. They were strongly imbued with the romantic spirit. They were comfortably short. They were condensed. They had an occasional conceit amounting almost to quaintness, which stimulated dull folks and suited people who were rummaging for novelities. These things pleased the taste of the day, and secured the popularity of the poems. But they had nothing to do with the real merit of the poetry.

They commended it to this generation, but will they commend it to all time? We think not. The august simplicity which is occasionally seen in Longfellow, will indeed always command applause; but the affectation, involution and strained metaphor which as often appear in his poetry will find little favor with posterity. He has written too much after a school to continue to enjoy a reputation as great as that which he now enjoys. That which commends him to this generation will detract from his merit in the next. His extravagance, which, from its novelty, adds to his popularity, will share the same fate as the quirks of the poets who wrote for the palled courtiers of Charles the Second. A purer taste will arise, and these meretricious ornaments will be discarded as worthless. But he will still be immortal. His extravagance is only occasional. He has written many fine poems. His productions, moreover, increase in merit as he grows older.

The second volume of Longfellow is superior to his first, inasmuch as it has less of these meretricious adornments. The original poems which it contains are superior to those in "The Voices of the Night," displaying a progressive excellence which justifies our opinion of the high genius of Mr. Longfellow. Let us be understood. We find fault with much of what Mr. Longfellow has written, for we regard him as capable of better things; and in all his works we see glimpses rather of what he might be, than of what he is. We look on the divinity but we do not hear his voice. Yet we believe Mr. Longfellow to be as conscious of his faults as we are ourselves; and we happen to know that he will listen favorably to honest criticism.

Our limits will not allow us to go into a detailed examination of the poems which have appeared in Mr. Longfellow's two volumes. Nor is it necessary that we should. The public is already familiar with his finest pieces, and it would be a work of supererogation to

quote largely from the volumes on our table. We shall content ourselves, therefore, with a single specimen from the volume first published. But of the contents of its successor we shall avail ourselves more freely. The poem we shall select from "The Voices of the Night" is one which has already been extensively quoted; but we insert it here because it is, perhaps, the best specimen of the peculiar merits and demerits which we commented on as characterising Longfellow's earlier poems. "The Hymn to the Night" may be taken as a type of the earlier volume.

"I hear the trailing garments of the Night  
Sweep through her marble halls!  
I saw her sable skirts all fringed with light  
From the celestial walls!

I felt her presence, by its spell of Night  
Stoop o'er me from above;  
The calm, majestic presence of the Night,  
As of the one I love.

I heard the sounds of sorrow and delight,  
The manifold soft chimes  
That fill the haunted chambers of the Night  
Like some old poet's rhymes.

From the cool cisterns of the midnight air  
My spirit drank repose;  
The fountain of perpetual peace flows there—  
From those deep cisterns flows,

O holy Night! from thee I learn to bear  
What man has borne before!  
Thou layest thy finger on the lips of care,  
And they complain no more.

Peace! Peace! Orestes-like I breathe this prayer!  
Descend with broad winged flight,  
The welcome, the thrice prayed for, the most fair,  
The best-loved Night."

The opening of this poem is inexpressibly grand, and comes across the soul like a strain of solemn music heard unexpectedly in a "dim cathedral aisle." There is a sensation of awe-awakened in the mind by the two first verses, which clings to us throughout the whole poem.

From the other volume on our table we shall quote more largely, both because the poems are better, and because they are less generally known. Before, however, we proceed to those which are our especial favorites, we have a word or two to say on some of the metaphors of Mr. Longfellow. For instance in a fine poem to the River Charles we have the following:

"More than this;—thy name reminds me  
Of three friends, all true and tried;  
And that name, like magic binds me  
Closer, closer to thy side.

Friends my soul with joy remembers!  
How like quivering flames they start,  
When I fan the living embers  
On the hearth-stone of my heart!"

Now these three lines which we have italicised have been held up, by more than one critic, as the finest in the poem, and the metaphor contained in them has been the theme of much applause. To all this we enter our caveat. There is too much of conceit in the metaphor

to render it chaste. It is hunted down. The grandeur of the thought in the preceding stanzas is, to our mind, impaired by the extravagance of the metaphor in these verses. Nor is the metaphor, or simile, for it partakes of both, exactly clear. The author has only a general, and by no means a distinct idea, of his own meaning. We do not wonder, however, that the verses should please some. They have an air of originality, and the alliteration in them is very pretty. But they have neither grandeur, simplicity, nor any of the higher qualities of poetry.

One of the finest poems in the volume is entitled "Excelsior." The merits of this poem are all of a high order. Its symbolical meaning will be at once perceived. Under the guise of an Alpine traveller it represents the incentives, the struggles, the fate of genius.

"The shades of night were falling fast,  
As through an Alpine village passed,  
A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice,  
A banner with the strange device,  
Excelsior!

His brow was sad; his eye beneath,  
Flashed like a falchion from its sheath,  
And like a silver clarion rung  
The accents of that unknown tongue,  
Excelsior!

In happy homes he saw the light  
Of household fires gleam warm and bright;  
Above, the spectral glaciers shone,  
And from his lips escaped a groan,  
Excelsior!

"Try not the Pass!" the old man said;  
'Dark lowers the tempest overhead,  
'The roaring torrent is deep and wide!'  
And loud that clarion voice replied,  
Excelsior!

'O stay,' the maiden said, 'and rest  
'Thy weary head upon this breast!'  
A tear stood in his bright blue eye,  
But still he answered, with a sigh,  
Excelsior!

'Beware the pine-tree's withered branch!  
Beware the awful avalanche!'  
This was the peasant's last good-night,  
A voice replied, far up the height,  
Excelsior!

At break of day, as heavenward  
The pious monks of Saint Bernard  
Uttered the oft-repeated prayer,  
A voice cried through the startled air,  
Excelsior!

A traveller, by the faithful hound,  
Half-buried in the snow was found,  
Still grasping in his hand of ice  
That banner with the strange device,  
Excelsior!

'There in the twilight cold and gray,  
Lifeless, but beautiful, he lay,  
And from the sky, serene and far,  
A voice fell, like a falling star,  
Excelsior!'

"Endymion" is an exquisite little poem, and may be read appropriately after the foregoing. We rank it

among the most beautiful of the productions of Mr. Longfellow.

"The rising moon has hid the stars;  
Her lovely rays, like golden bars,  
Lie on the landscape green,  
With shadows brown between.

And silver white the river gleams,  
As if Diana, in her dreams,  
Had dropt her silver bow  
Upon the meadows low.

On such a tranquil night as this,  
She woke Endymion with a kiss,  
When, sleeping in the grove,  
He dreamed not of her love.

Like Dian's kiss, unask'd, unsought,  
Love gives itself, but is not bought;  
Nor voice, nor sound betrays  
Its deep, impassion'd gaze.

It comes—the beautiful, the free,  
The crown of all humanity—  
In silence and alone  
To seek the elected one.

It lifts the boughs, whose shadows deep,  
Are Life's oblivion, the soul's sleep,  
And kisses the clos'd eyes  
Of him, who, slumbering, lies.

Oh, weary hearts! oh, slumbering eyes!  
Oh, drooping souls, whose destinies  
Are fraught with fear and pain,  
Ye shall be loved again!

No one is so accurs'd by fate,  
No one so wholly desolate,  
But some heart, though unknown,  
Responds unto his own.

Responds—as if with unseen wings  
An angel swept its quivering strings;  
And whispers, in its song,  
Where hast thou staid so long?"

There is something in the little piece entitled "God's Acre," which reminds us of an old Saxon minister, rough, unhewn, and massy, but full of rugged simplicity that is sometimes even sublime. There is a sturdy feeling, an honest manliness about this little effusion which has, to us, many charms. Nor is the soothing hope held out in the third and fourth stanzas the least merit of the poem.

"I like that ancient Saxon phrase, which calls .  
'The burial ground God's-Acre! It is just;  
It consecrates each grave within its walls,  
And breathes a benison o'er the sleeping dust.

God's-Acre! Yes, that blessed name imparts  
Comfort to those, who in the grave have sown  
The seed, that they had garnered in their hearts,  
'Their bread of life, alas! no more their own.

Into its furrows shall we all be cast,  
In the sure faith, that we shall rise again  
At the great harvest, when the arch-angel's blast  
Shall winnow, like a fan, the chaff and grain.

'Then shall the good stand in immortal bloom,  
In the fair gardens of that second birth;  
And each bright blossom, mingle its perfume  
With that of flowers, which never bloomed on earth

With thy rude ploughshare, Death, turn up the sod,  
And spread the furrow for the seed we sow ;  
'This is the field and Acre of our God,  
'This is the place where human harvests grow!"

Here we close our quotations from the volumes before us. It would not be doing justice to Mr. Longfellow if we were to encroach further on his copy-right, and we have only made these few quotations in order to give the public some idea of his best qualities. The stanzas on the Skeleton in Armor, the lines on a village Blacksmith, a little piece called the "Rainy Day," and two poems of a superior order, one entitled "The Goblet of Life," and the other addressed "To the river Charles," are our favorites in this collection.

We leave Mr. Longfellow with a single remark—he is in danger of idling away his years. He has a cozy professorship, he is endowed with a scholarly taste, his bent is toward the epicurean creed, "enjoy life easily." He has genius, high genius; but then he loves "to take his ease in his inn." The incentive to prolonged, incessant, arduous exertion, which goads so many to immortality, is wanting to Longfellow. He is playing the part of Gray, and, like Gray, verily he will have his reward. Posterity will despise his indolence, while they admire his poems. Enjoying the applause of a circle of friends, he is content with their approbation, or, if he aspires after a more extended fame, he wants the energy to struggle for it. He seems to write for his *clique*, and then coolly to take his chance with the public, reasoning much as Sancho Panza did, "but let them say of me what they list, I neither lose nor win, and so my name be but in print, and go about the world from hand to hand, I care not a fig." Now this may be the true philosophy for a man who loves the ease of his study before the honors of the world; but it is not the creed which, if acted out, will make a poet immortal.